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France

Dairy Livestock and Poultry

French Press is Critical of Beef Sold in France

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Report Highlights:

A French satirical and investigative newspaper published articles denouncing hormones in beef, suspecting BSE to be present in the United States, focusing on the drawbacks of French beef labeling scheme, and revealing that some supermarkets in France illegally re-package and label cuts of beef with new expiration dates, when cuts get close to the expiration date.

Includes PSD changes: No
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Unscheduled Report
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The French satirical and investigative weekly newspaper “Le Canard Enchaîné” recently published a special edition on French food, entitled “What do we eat? Deep survey of our plates.” The tone of the paper is often critical toward the quality of foodstuffs available on the French market, and is consumer-oriented. It covers a wide range of products including meat and poultry, seafood, fruits and vegetables, dairy products, GMO’s, additives and organic products. A summary of “Le Canard Enchaîné” article on beef follows.

1. Hormones in Beef:

According to a French veterinarian, “no-one seriously believes that the U.S. beef herd is not contaminated with BSE, because the meat lobby is very powerful in the United States; however, the U.S. beef herd is officially treated with hormones, and FDA gives its blessing to it.”

U.S. producers stopped feeding their cattle on meat meals in April 1996 as a precautionary measure, depriving the European Union of the ability to use this feeding method as an argument to ban U.S. beef during WTO negotiations.

In Europe, consumers are strongly opposed to hormones in beef, while the opinions of scientists vary on the subject. They consider that hormones produced by large pharmaceutical companies are safe, while hormones produced in clandestine laboratories such as diethylstilbestrol (DES) increase animal weight by 1 kg per day and create cancer risks for consumers.

2. Labeling Beef:

The “French Beef” (VBF-“Viande Bovine Française”) logo was created in 1996 to identify beef products derived from the domestic cattle herd, in response to the Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) crisis. Representatives in the French beef sector recognize that they would have never implemented such a labeling scheme without consumer associations threatening to boycott beef. The VBF logo reassured consumers about the origin of beef products available in retail outlets, but has never been used in cafeterias, restaurants, and ready-to-eat meals.

An additional labeling scheme specifying product origin by type of animal in retail outlets was launched in France in the fall of 1997. Although French consumers believed that beef meat was coming exclusively from steers, they learned that in fact it is mostly from cows, then from heifers, steers, and young bulls. Cows are either from dairy herds (mainly the Holstein breed) fed on silage and soybean concentrates, or from beef herds (mainly Charolais and Limousine breeds), fed on grass and forage. Heifers are young cows fed on grass, cereals and forage. Young bulls are fed exclusively on silage and soybean concentrates.

According to some butchers, the quality of meat is lower when it comes from an animal fed on silage than from a grass-fed animal. They mention that meat from cattle fed on silage “darkens after maturation.” During the maturation time, meat flavor, tenderness and color develop. Ideally, this period lasts two to three weeks, but for productivity purposes, meat is often sold three to four days after slaughtering. Butchers often prefer heifer meat because it is smoother than meat from other animals.

3. Re-packaging Beef:

In certain French supermarkets, cuts of beef that are close to the date of expiration are illegally re-packaged and labeled with a new expiration date. The Fraud Repression Office (DGCCRF) of the French Ministry of Economy, Finance and Industry, as well as veterinarian services of the French Ministry of Agriculture, are in charge of controlling these illegal practices. DGCCRF notes that national supermarket chains like Carrefour, Auchan, and Continent do not have such practices in 98 percent of their stores, while independent supermarket chains are more likely to repackage illegally, generally for economic purposes. Veterinarian services note that supermarket owners are usually more afraid of the compulsory posting of a notice of censure at the store entrance than of the fine to be paid. The notice of censure specifies that the store re-packaged and labeled cuts of beef with wrong expiry dates.